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1772

CAPTAIN MARION

by *ALEXANDRE DUMAS*

*An account of the massacre of
Captain Marion Du Fresne
by the Maoris in 1772 written
by ALEXANDRE DUMAS père
and now translated for
the first time by
F. W. REED*

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CAPTAIN MARION is the story of the killing of Captain Marion du Fresne by the Maoris of North Auckland in 1772.

It was written by Alexandre Dumas as one of four pieces under the title of *Drames de la Mer*, and seems to be largely based on Crozet's log. This translation, the only one in English, is by F. W. Reed, the Dumas authority, and it now appears in print for the first time. Mr Reed also contributes a most interesting introduction on the subject of Dumas and his little-known writings on early New Zealand.

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These ships were the *Mascarin* and the *Castries*, arriving from Van Diemen's Land and commanded by Captain Marion, an officer of the French India Company. He was completely unaware of what had happened at the time of de Surville's voyage. Moreover all this coast, though explored three years before by Cook, was as yet scarcely known.

On the 16th of April, 1772, he cast anchor in a poor roadstead of the island of Te-Ika-a-Maui, that is to say on the northern part of New Zealand. That night the ships narrowly escaped being cast ashore. So hastily did they get under way that they were compelled to leave their anchors, promising themselves to return and recover them later. In fact, they arrived back on the 26th of April, and on the following 3rd of May anchored in the Bay of Islands, near Cook's Cape Brett. Scarcely was this accomplished than three canoes were seen paddling towards the ship. There was a gentle breeze and a delightfully calm sea. All the sailors were on deck, full of curiosity regarding these men barely come forth these three years from the mists of the unknown.

One of the canoes carried nine men. It drew near the ship, and immediately a few trinkets were flung to those who manned it, inviting them to come on board. For a moment there was hesitation, then they appeared to decide, and shortly the nine men were on deck.

The captain received them, took them to his cabin, and offered them some bread and liqueurs. They ate the bread with obvious pleasure, but only after Captain Marion had first tasted it before them. As for the liqueurs, contrary to other natives of the south seas, they only sampled these with repugnance, some even spitting it out and not swallowing it. An endeavour was then made to discover what articles attracted them.

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pusillanimous not to take advantage of this good-will on the part of the inhabitants. Thus one morning, on Te Kuri's invitation, they landed. Yet precautions had not been neglected. The long-boat, well armed, included a detachment of soldiers and was commanded by Captain Marion and his lieutenant, Monsieur Crozet. After this first excursion they travelled all over the bay, counting within a small area some twenty villages, each of which contained from two hundred to four hundred inhabitants. Moreover, as soon as the French approached, leaving their whares empty all came to meet them; women, children, warriors and old men. Then, just as on the ships, they began by the gift of presents, after which they gave the islanders to understand that they were in want of timber. At once Te Kuri and the other chiefs invited Monsieur Marion and Monsieur Crozet to follow them, and walking ahead of the little troop led them a couple of leagues into the interior, almost to the edge of a forest of magnificent cedars (kauris), from which the officers at once selected the trees they needed.

That very day two-thirds of the crews laboured, not only at felling the trees, but also to form tracks over three hills and across a swamp which would require to be passed in order to transport the spars to the sea. In addition some huts were erected on the sea-shore at the spot nearest to the workshops. These huts formed a kind of store-house, to which every day the vessels sent their long-boats loaded with provisions for the workers.

Thus three posts had been established on land, one being on the island in the harbour. This was both the hospital for the sick and the forge where they made the iron rings for the spars and the hoops for some casks which were to be repaired. Ten men fully armed,

all these proofs of friendship, some among the officers, Monsieur Crozet especially, retained their first mistrust.

Since they had no knowledge of the coming of Cook and de Surville, they were compelled to refer to the narrative of Tasman. This depicted the islanders as cruel, treacherous and vindictive. He had added that he believed them to be cannibals, though, regarding the last, this was beginning to be thought one of those stories with which nurses cradle their infants to sleep.

Yet when Monsieur Marion, fully reassured, suddenly gave the order to disarm the cutters and the long-boat proceeding to the shore, Monsieur Crozet did all he could to have this instruction, which he considered imprudent, rescinded. The captain would listen to nothing; he was completely bewitched by this sham friendship. Indeed, feeling the most complete security, the captain took pleasure in living among the islanders. When they came on the ship, they were for ever in his cabin, talking and laughing with him, because, thanks to Bougainville's vocabulary, they had come to a full comprehension of the natives.

For their part these last were fully aware that Monsieur Marion was the principal white chief. Every day they brought him a superb turbot (*patiki*—flounder?), because they knew the captain was fond of this fish. Each time he went ashore there were great cries of joy, unending demonstrations of affection in which the entire population joined, even to the women and children.

On the 8th of June, the captain landed as usual. He was accompanied by a troop of natives who followed him, some in his boat among the rowers, others in their own canoes which paddled around him. On this day the joyful cries and friendly demonstrations were greater than usual. The native chiefs, Te Kuri in the

centre, assembled, and with one accord recognized Monsieur Marion as the supreme chief of the country. Following this, they made his toilet, all save the tattooing, knotting his hair like theirs upon the top of his head, and inserting in it the four feathers which indicated supremacy and proved his lofty rank.

That evening Monsieur Marion returned on board happier and more satisfied than ever. For his part Monsieur Crozet, lieutenant of the *Mascarin*, had, among all the natives who visited the ship, become friendly with a youth seventeen or eighteen years old, of gentle physiognomy and a quite superior intelligence. He visited the lieutenant every day. On the 11th of June he came as usual; but this time appeared sad, almost overcome. Monsieur Crozet had appeared to wish for some weapons and ornaments constructed of the magnificent jade (greenstone) which is employed by the New Zealanders for the fabrication of their arms.

The youth had brought these various objects, which he presented with tears in his eyes. As usual Monsieur Crozet wished to give him in exchange some iron tools and some red handkerchiefs, which he had noticed he greatly desired; but he rejected them, smiling sadly and shaking his head in a melancholy manner. Upon this the lieutenant wished him to take back the articles he had brought, but he refused. The lieutenant offered him food, but again he declined, accompanying this with the same slow and sad motion of the head which had already disquieted Monsieur Crozet. Then he flung a last look at the lieutenant, a look of indescribable sadness which seemed to bid him a final adieu, and rushed out of the cabin, mounted the deck, flung himself into his canoe, and disappeared.

Monsieur Crozet, himself saddened by the melancholy of his young friend, sought for some cause which

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could have induced this sadness never before noticeable in him. Whatever causes came into his mind, the veritable, the actual reason escaped him.

Finally, the next day, June 12th, about one o'clock, Captain Marion had his cutter armed, descended into it, and took with him two young officers, Messieurs Lettoux and de Vaudricourt, a volunteer and the master-at-arms of the ship. Some armed men accompanied them.

The small troop consisted in all of seventeen persons. Te Kuri, another chief, and five or six natives had come that day, showing more affection than ever, to invite Monsieur Marion to eat oysters at Te Kuri's hut, and to cast a net in that part of the bay situated beside the village where he lived. They left with both French and natives in the captain's boat.

That evening did not see Monsieur Marion return. This event, which should have frightened everyone, it being the first time such a thing had occurred, produced only a slight effect upon the ship's company. Understanding with the natives was so perfect, and their hospitality was so well known, that no one was disturbed at the absence. They believed, as was probable, that Monsieur Marion wished next day to visit the work at the shops, which was already well advanced, and had slept on the ground to be nearer and to repair at daybreak to the kauri forest where, as has been seen, the third post was.

Next day, the 13th, without being induced by the slightest feeling of disquietude, the commandant of the *Castries*, Monsieur Du Clesmeur, sent his long-boat to fetch the wood and water necessary for the day. There was an agreement between the two ships that each in turn would undertake this labour and this was the day on which it fell to the *Castries*. The long-boat left at five o'clock in the morning.

one from another and busied in cutting, splitting and lopping branches from their wood, when they were intent on their task, the savages had returned with spears and clubs and attacked them with impunity. So well had their measures been taken, that suddenly each sailor, at the moment when he least suspected it, found himself attacked by seven or eight islanders. In the sight of the man they had just rescued, ten seamen had fallen in less than a few minutes. As for him, good luck had caused him to be attacked by three men only. For this reason he had been able to defend himself for a moment and repulse them. This moment of respite gave him the opportunity to take flight, much the more urgent in that he saw coming to the aid of those who had assailed him four more savages. These having ended with his comrades, now came to finish him in turn.

Wounded though he was with two spear-thrusts, he had time to gain a place on the shore well covered with bushes. Through these he had slipped like a serpent and, without movement and almost without breathing, had waited and looked. He had watched a terrible thing! The savages dragged the corpses of his unlucky comrades into a kind of clearing. There they had stripped them of their clothing, opened their abdomens, removed their entrails, and then cut them in pieces. The women and children who assisted at this atrocious operation collected the blood in leaves and drank it themselves or caused the men to do so. These savages who refused and spat out wine drank this blood with delight.

At this sight he could restrain his terror no longer, and seeing the savages absorbed in their work, he had resumed his crawling towards the shore, flung himself into the sea and endeavoured to gain the ship by swimming.

He had barely covered a quarter of the distance when he had been sighted and a boat had left the *Mascarin* to bring assistance to him.

This narrative was much more terrible in that it naturally led to the presumption that Captain Marion and the sixteen men who had accompanied him and not returned on board had been murdered like the men of the long-boat.

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There was still no news of Marion. Though almost certain of his death, they could not leave the island without being entirely convinced on the point. It was therefore determined that two or three days before departing they would make an expedition to the village of Te Kuri. From the natives' own statements, since it was there the captain had disappeared, it was there he must be sought. Moreover it was in that place they had seen the two boats ashore and surrounded by natives.

The time of departure was fixed for two days later, that is to say for the 14th of July, 1772. On the morning of the 12th of July, Lieutenant Crozet ordered the long-boat to get under way, embarking in it a strong detachment commanded by experienced officers who were ordered not to return on board without definite information concerning the unfortunate Marion and those who had accompanied him.

To obtain this, and to leave in the minds of the savages a potent idea of our power, the instructions were to land at the spot where the boats had been, to climb to the village, carry this by force if it were defended, exterminate the inhabitants, ransack every hut with the greatest care, and collect even the smallest articles which had belonged to the captain or his companions in misfortune, in order conclusively to prove their death by an authentic official report, and finally to end their expedition by setting fire to the village. After doing this the expedition would return towards the ship, towing all the war canoes they could collect, which, fastened together, would, being set on fire, make an immense conflagration in the midst of the sea. In this way the New Zealanders from the heights where they had taken refuge would view the burning of their fleet.

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The long-boat moved away, carrying fifty men armed with swords and guns, and itself well equipped with swivel-guns and blunderbusses. The officer in command landed first where he had been directed, but the boats had disappeared, having been burnt by the natives for the sake of the iron used in their construction.

Then they passed to the second object of the expedition. With fixed bayonets the detachment mounted to Te Kuri's village, only to find it abandoned. The sole inhabitants were five or six old men too feeble to follow the population which had departed. Seated upon a species of wooden bench, they waited, like the Romans of the Capitol, the modern Gauls who advanced towards them with intentions no less hostile than were those of their ancestors to the senators.

It was desired to take them prisoners, but the first on whom they laid hands had with him a spear, and with this he struck the soldier who touched him. The wounded man drew back a step and then passed his bayonet through the other's body. The remainder were spared.

At the moment the soldiers entered one side of the village they saw escape from its farther extremity, though beyond musket-shot, Te Kuri and about twenty men. The traitor wore upon his shoulders Captain Marion's cloak, easily recognized by its two colours, scarlet and blue.

With their gaze they followed him to the hill, where he joined those crowning the heights nearest to the village, who, from there, uttering loud cries, watched the carrying out of the orders. These were thoroughly to search all the whares of the natives. In that belonging to Te Kuri they found the skull of a man which had been cooked some days before. All the

remaining flesh had been eaten and upon the skull itself were still to be seen traces of the teeth of the cannibals. In another corner was a man's thigh, half eaten and still retaining the wooden spit on which it had been roasted.

The investigations continued, because they could not tell to whom these human remains belonged. In another hut they found the body of a shirt which was recognized as having belonged to Captain Marion. The neck was bloodstained, and they perceived three or four tears also stained with blood at the sides.

In two other huts were portions of garments and the pistols of the young ensign Vaudricourt, who, as we said, had accompanied his captain.

Lastly, in still another whare they found the weapons from the cutter and a heap of fragments and blood-stained clothing. These were the wearing apparel of the unlucky sailors.

All these proofs of the murder combined, the official report of Captain Marion's death was drawn up. After this they set fire to the huts, and so that the inhabitants should not return and extinguish the conflagration, they only left the village when it was completely reduced to ashes.

Near Te Kuri's village was another, much better fortified than most, and of which the chief, suspected of being an accomplice of Te Kuri, was named Piki-Ore. In the midst of the destruction of the first village, the detachment noticed that the other was being evacuated by the natives. This flight confirmed their suspicions and when the village of Te Kuri had been burnt, they proceeded towards that of Piki-Ore. Though more powerfully fortified, the inhabitants made no attempt to defend it.

Every hut was carefully visited, and in these, as in

those of Te Kuri's village, they found many objects proving to be from the boats, and the remains of clothing torn from the sailors. On all these garments stains of blood proved that those who had worn them had succumbed to a violent death.

Like its predecessor, this second village was reduced to ashes. Thereafter, in order to accomplish the task of destruction in full, the men of the detachment pushed into the water two war canoes and, having taken them into tow, conveyed them to the sea adjacent to the *Mascarin*. From them they removed all the planks which could be used, then set fire to the two hulks which were each about sixty feet long.

It was by the light from this last conflagration that on the 14th of July, 1772, the two vessels, the *Castries* and the *Mascarin*, left the *Bay of Murderers*.